

Text-Dependent Questions

Effective questions about literature and nonfiction texts require students to delve into a text to find answers.

Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey

The types of questions that students are asked about a text influence how they read it. If students are asked recall and recitation questions, they learn to read for that type of information. If they are asked synthesis questions, they learn to read for *that* type of information. Unfortunately, many of the questions that students are asked are about personal connections, which may not even require that they have read the text at all.

The architects of the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts are challenging the practice of asking students questions that can be answered without reading the text. They are pressing for questions that instead require students to locate evidence within the text. Those text-dependent questions require students to read carefully and produce evidence in their verbal and written responses. This is not to say that personal connections should be avoided at all costs—after all, readers naturally compare the information they are reading with their experiences. The argument for text-dependent questions, however, asserts that discussions and writing prompts should focus on the text itself to build a strong foundation of knowledge. That

purposefully built foundational knowledge can then be leveraged by learners to make personal connections that are meaningful and informed.

For example, a teacher could ask the following two questions of students who have been studying “A Way Forward? The Soft Path for Water” by Peter Gleick, an essay in *Last Call at the Oasis: The Global Water Crisis and Where We Go From Here* (edited by Karl Weber, 2012, PublicAffairs):

- Has your family made any changes to reduce water consumption?
- What are the differences between soft and hard paths to water management?

The first question can be answered without ever reading the essay. A con-

versation about the first question may be very animated and interesting, but it does not require the students to develop any level of understanding of the information presented by the author.

Instructional leaders who observe classroom instruction may witness significant student engagement in such a class discussion, but they should ask themselves about the actual reading and thinking that is required for the discussion. The first question about water consumption habits is actually irrelevant within the context of evaluating the essay, which focuses on systemic water conservation methods. It is important that teachers know how to engage students beyond simply asking them to tell a personal story. The content itself can and should be used to engage.

Types of Text-Dependent Questions

Teachers can structure questions in several ways so that students must return to the text to find evidence for their responses. Those questions should not be focused solely on recall. The emphasis should be on using explicit and implicit information from the text to support reasoning.

Watch the Video

Watch a teacher use text-dependent questions in a literature lesson at www.nassp.org/pl0912fisher.



At least six categories of questions can be used to structure a progression of text-dependent questions that move from explicit to implicit meaning and from sentence level to whole text and across multiple texts. (See figure 1.) Some types of questions may not be suitable for a particular reading; there is no requirement that all of them must be used with every piece of text. The examples that follow relate to the water essay by Gleick mentioned earlier. For an example of text-dependent questions using literature, see the video that accompanies this column at www.nassp.org/pl0912fisher.

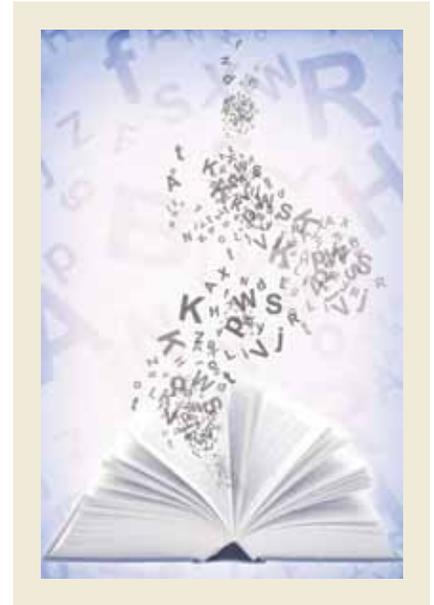
General understanding. Questions that build general understanding get at the gist of the text. Often, those questions focus on the author's main claim and the evidence used to support that claim, the arc of the story, or the sequence of information. For the water essay, the teacher might ask, "Which is the water path recommended by Gleick?" Interestingly, this question is not directly addressed in the essay, and students will need to find clues from across the text to figure out his main claim.

Alternatively, the teacher might say, "Discuss the ages of water and why Gleick believes we are headed into the third age." As noted in the structure of this question, text-dependent questions do not need to be answered in whole-class format. Students can be encouraged to discuss their thinking with their peers. This question has a clear-cut answer, but it is central to understanding the essay and is a major point that the author is trying to make.

Key details. Questions that focus on important details that the author uses to inform the reader often include *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, or *how* in the stem and can include more nuanced details that add clarity to the reading. For example, the question, "What is the difference between water and water services?" is key to understanding Gleick's perspective. The teacher might also ask, "What is one method Gleick identifies for reducing water consumption?" Key detail questions tend to focus on information presented directly in the text, but it's important that the targeted information be essential to understanding the text, not just trivia. Key details should be used to scaffold students' understanding as they respond to more complex questions.

Vocabulary and text structure. Some of the questions that students must consider are about the vocabulary used by the author and the structure of the text itself. Text-structure questions require students to consider how the reading is organized, such as by using problems and solutions or character dialogue to propel action. When asking questions related to vocabulary, teachers must be sure to include both denotations (definitions) and connotations (ideas or feelings evoked) of words. In addition, as appropriate, the questions may focus on shades of meaning, word choice, figurative language, idioms, and confusing words or phrases. Finally, questions can give students opportunities to use context or structural clues to determine the meaning of unknown words.

For example, the teacher might ask students to summarize the differ-



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ences between productivity, efficiency, and supply, which are three ideas discussed in the essay about water. Alternatively, the teacher might ask students to determine the meaning of the word *ozonation* from context clues or to discuss why the author chose the word *emerged* when talking about *Homo sapiens* over time.

In addition, the teacher might ask students to comment on the structure of the essay, noting the differences between the parts in terms of tone and structure. Attentive students would notice areas of significant description, areas that rely on problem-and-solution structures, and passages that are meant to be persuasive.

Purpose. The genre of the text and the use of narration help students

make sense of what they are reading. In addition, understanding the overall purpose of the text guides students in following the flow of the reading. Readers should understand whether the text is meant to inform, entertain, persuade, or explain something to them. There are also situations in which the text has a specific bias or provides only part of the story. In those situations, students could be asked about the perspectives that are not explored in the text. The questions that the teacher might ask that relate to the author's purpose for the water essay include:

- How does Gleick attempt to convince readers that water is a worthy topic of discussion?
- What is Gleick's purpose in writ-

ing this? Is he trying to inform, entertain, or persuade? How do you know?

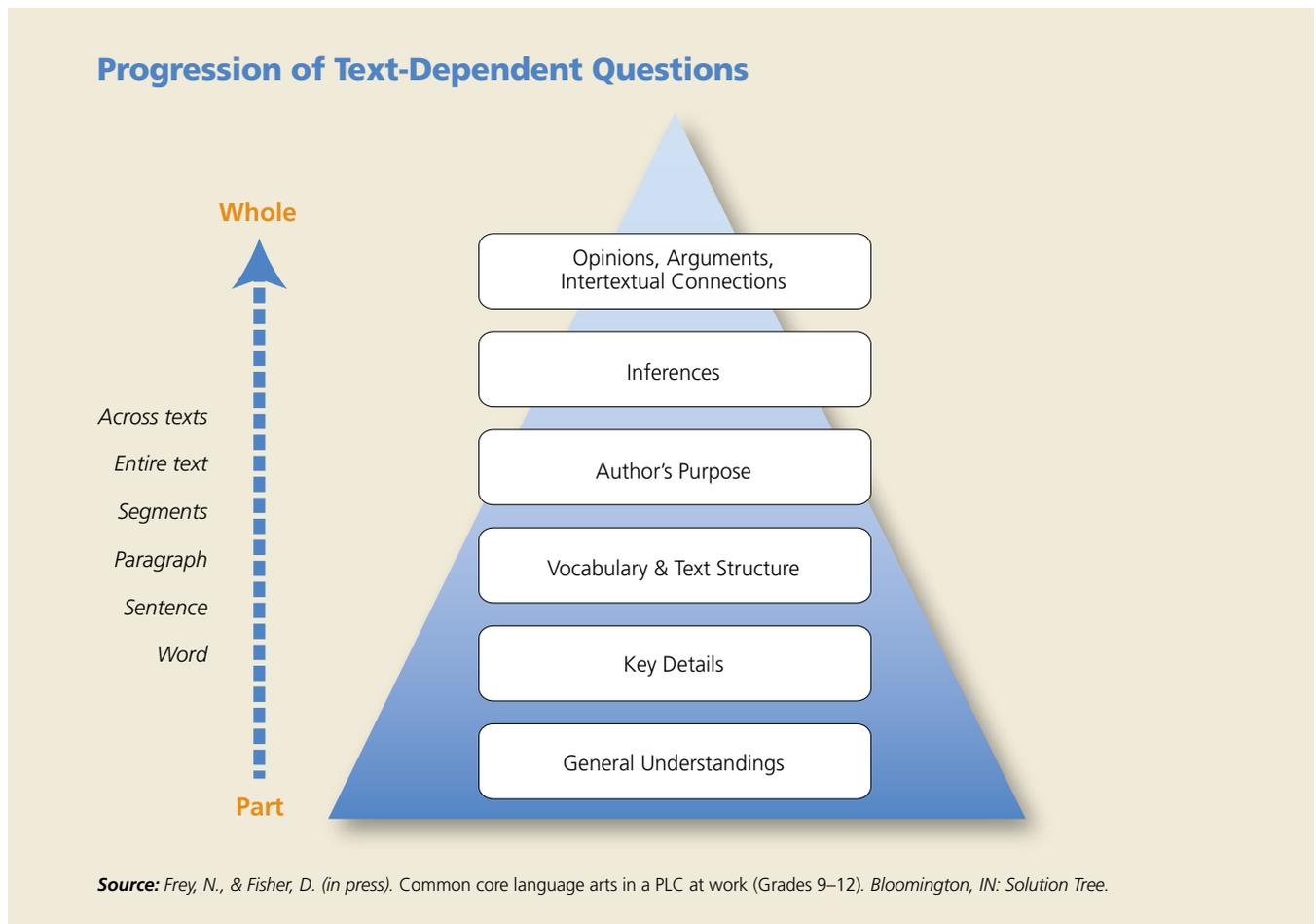
- Is Gleick biased? What is your evidence?
- Does Gleick acknowledge other perspectives?

Inferences. Some of the questions that students need to think about require them to understand how the parts of a text build to a whole. This means that they must probe each argument in persuasive text, each idea in informational text, or each key detail in literary text. Importantly, inference questions require students to read the entire selection so that they know where the text is going and how they can reconsider key points in the text as contributing elements of the whole.

In the Gleick essay, inference questions might include, How does the information at the start of the essay, about the United States using less water today compared with 30 years ago, help Gleick make his argument for the third age of water? and How does Gleick use the six differences between hard and soft paths to build the case for water services?

Opinions, arguments, and intertextual connections. The final category of text-dependent questions should be used sparingly and typically should be asked only after students have read and reread a text several times to fully develop their understanding. Readers should have opinions about what they read, and they should be able to argue their perspectives using evidence from the text and from other texts, experiences, and beliefs that they hold. For example, while reading about water, the teacher might ask, "Did Gleick

Figure 1



make a convincing argument about the ages of water?” “Is there sufficient evidence presented that a soft path is the appropriate direction?” or even “How do Gleick’s recommendations compare with those presented in Gary White’s essay [which was also published in *Last Call at the Oasis*]?” Those questions often result in deep and engaging conversations, especially when students have read the text and understood it.

Text-Dependent Questions Prompt Critical Thinking

Teachers should ask text-dependent questions, but students can also ask text-dependent questions of themselves and one another as they learn to read and think this way. The overall intent of asking text-dependent questions is to build a habit of critical thinking, and critical think-

ing should lead to thoughtful critical analysis. Educators do not need to create another generation of teacher-dependent learners. Nor do educators need to teach students that they must accept what an author says as the absolute and unquestioned truth. Reading is a transaction between the author and the reader, and everyone uses their background knowledge each time they read. But everyone must also thoroughly understand the author’s position to critically analyze it. That requires more than simply drawing on personal experiences.

As Rosenblatt (1995) noted, “The reader must remain faithful to the author’s text and must be alert to the potential clues concerning character and motive” (p. 11). Rosenblatt (1995) also cautioned that readers might ignore elements in a text and fail to realize that they are “imputing

to the author views unjustified by the text” (p. 11). The goal in creating text-dependent questions is to balance the reader and the text so that each is involved in the transaction of reading. **PL**

REFERENCE

- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1995). *Literature as exploration* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Modern Language Association.

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